DNRC/Montana Historical Society Oral History Program

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1. Interviewee: Michelle Geary Holt
2. Interviewer: Bradley Hansen
3. Date of Interview: December 11, 2013
4. Location: Corette Library, Carroll College, Helena, Montana, United States

Introduction

This interview highlights Michelle Geary Holt's experiences ranching near Helmville, Montana. Her memories/experiences help provide a much clearer understanding of the important role women have played in Montana's agricultural and ranching history.

Interview

Brad: It is December 11, 2013, and I am with Michelle Holt. My name is Brad Hansen, and we are on the Campus of Carroll College, in the library. We are going to talk about some of Michelle's memories and experiences ranching in Montana, as well as her family. Just for the record, will you state your name and spell it as well?

Michelle: Michelle Geary Holt.

Brad: Perfect. Would you like to follow this outline? To start off, where are your parents from? How did they meet? Why did they decide to become ranchers? Please describe how your grandma and great-grandma fit into this story as well.

Michelle: My dad is from Helmville, Montana. He was born in Butte, Montana, because that was where my grandma would go to have her kids. My mom was born in Billings, Montana, and her dad was a traveling salesman for Hills Brothers Coffee. She also lived in Ogden, Utah, and then moved to Butte by the time she was in the later grades of grade school. Helmville has never had a high school. When it was time for my dad to go to high school, he lived with his aunt (my grandma's sister) and her husband in Butte and attended Boys Central High School. My Irish grandma and grandpa were very Catholic, so they decided that my dad (who was the oldest of his siblings) would go to high school in Butte, at Boys Central.

Mom attended Girls Central High School. The two high schools would have functions together. That's how Mom and Dad met. I think they were in a play together. My Irish grandma and grandpa were very Catholic, so they decided that my dad (who was the oldest of his siblings) would go to high school in Butte, at Boys Central.

Brad: Butte is a very Catholic community.

Michelle: A very Catholic community. That is where my grandma was raised. She was born in Chicago, but when she was two she and her parents came to Butte in a covered wagon. After they were out of high school, my dad came to Carroll, played on the football team for a year and destroyed his knee. He then decided, for a reason I don't remember, he wanted to become a mortician.

Brad: Interesting.

Michelle: It was quite interesting. He went to the College of Mortuary Science in San Francisco. After he graduated, he married my mom, and then was drafted into World War II. When he came home from the war, he and Mom lived in Butte, which is where I was born. He worked at some mortuaries there. After witnessing the atrocities of World War II in France and Germany, it was hard for him to be a mortician. This was a time when many deaths in Butte were unattended. He would spend time going down to the railroad tracks picking up body parts. It was a bit much. I was born in June 1948, by that September my grandfather knew the mortuary business was taking a toll on my dad. He said, "Why don't you come back to the ranch?" So, from September of 1948 until his death in July1994 my dad was back on the ranch. Of course, that's where I was raised, and that's where Mom made, and still makes, her home.

Brad: A quick follow up question. Will you talk about how your grandparents came to own the ranch? Also will you describe where Helmville is for people who don't know?

Michelle: Helmville is in North Powell County in the Nevada Creek and Blackfoot River Valleys. It is about 55 miles northwest of Helena and 50 miles north of Deer Lodge.

Brad: It is up over MacDonald Pass down to 200?

Michelle: Yes. Over to Avon and head north at the 287 junction for 28 miles. Helmville is between Avon and the Highway 200 junction. Helmville was really remote when I was a kid. Not so much anymore. My grandpa, Thomas Geary, had the ranch handed down to him from my Great-Grandpa, John Geary, who started the ranch. He left Ireland in 1863 and worked his way west. He was in Helena working the placer mines when he heard about the discovery of gold in Blackfoot City, a town northwest of Helena. The placer mines were becoming depleted, so he left Helena for Blackfoot City. He'd only been there a few hours when he ran into two of his first cousins that he'd grown up with in Ireland. The two first cousins were brothers, Michael and James Geary. The three worked the placer mines there for an unknown amount of time, probably from about 1864 to mid-1865. Their hearts weren't really into mining. They were people of the land. They came from farms in Ireland. They were driven out because of one of the potato blights that brought hundreds of thousands to America. One day they decided to take a walk

down Nevada Creek, which ran near Blackfoot City. They kept walking and walking, and they found this valley that reminded them of Ireland, so they stayed.

Brad: And that was near Helmville?

Michelle: That is Helmville. There was no Helmville when they arrived. They were the first. My great-grandfather donated the land for the church, the cemetery, and much of the town. It's called Helmville because at one point after this little village started growing, a gentleman named Henry Helm arrived and stayed. He happened to be the one who wrote to Washington D.C. requesting the establishment of a post office. D.C. replied saying to call the place Helmville. Grandpa maintained my great-grandfather always wished he'd written that letter.

Brad: Since he donated the land.

Michelle: It is funny. We've had a hard time nailing down the date. Great-Grandpa wasn't even sure what month he was born. He knew he was born in 1832, and it was the night of the "big wind." Nobody knows the month and date. He immigrated in 1863, and he was probably in Helmville by 1866, he and his two first cousins. They built a small one-room cabin, approximately 16' by 24' and started buying milk cows. Milk cows weren't as profitable as they had hoped, so they switched to shorthorn cattle. This switch was profitable. Years later Herefords became the breed of choice. For the first years they lived in the one-room cabin that they built and lit it with candles they made from the tallow of their cattle. This pioneer cabin, as we call it, is still on the ranch. My first cousin, who manages the ranch, renovated it last year.

Brad: Really?

Michelle: It sat in a meadow along a creek. Not in my lifetime because by the time my grandpa and his siblings were born, the cabin had been moved from the wet creek bottom to what is now the main ranch. They used horses and skids to pull the original homestead cabin.

Brad: And still lives in it?

Michelle: No, we don't live in it; we just now have moved it from a spot on the ranch in the barnyard to another spot that is a little drier. My cousin paid to restore it. Anyway, the three of them lived in the small cabin. Eventually each applied for a brand. Our brand was one of the first in Montana. Great-Grandpa applied for the Homestead Act and got it. He acquired other acreage through the Railroad Land Grant and the Timber Claim Act.

This was a guy who was born in 1832 and by the time he died at ninety he had left his home in Ireland at 32, only carrying a sack of personal belongings, waved good-bye to his parents and never saw them again, and he left a prosperous ranch in the hands of two of his sons, retired to Deer Lodge, and enjoyed city life for his last years. He did see all but one of his brothers. He brought them over from Ireland to Helmville. There were eight or nine siblings, and one brother stayed in Ireland on the family farm. Great-Grandpa never saw him again. Great-Grandpa worked hard and became prosperous. As more and more people moved to Helmville, it became a bustling community. There were hotels, livery stables, bars, churches, general stores. Lots of people lived in town whose prosperity mainly came from the growing

number of ranchers. As the dry land farmers that were between Helmville and Ovando (on the old road) couldn't make a go at it, Great-Grandpa would go to them with food, bags of potatoes and cabbage, and money, and he would give them what he thought was fair price for their piece of land. These were people that were hungry and in need of leaving. My uncles told me that he would even give them a horse and a milk cow. He would buy their land. He acquired thousands of acres. By the time he died at ninety, this is a guy who left Ireland with a sack on his back, he died a prosperous man because of his hard work.

He retired in 1913, left the ranch, and moved all the way to Deer Lodge with my great-grandma, Marianne, and handed the ranch down to two of his sons. He and Great-Grandma had eight kids. The oldest was my grandpa. Great-Grandpa told his kids that they had to decide what they wanted to do with their lives. Figure out how to pass this ranch on. Well, it turned out that only my grandpa and one of his brothers wanted to stay on the ranch. Everybody else left. Grandpa and my great-uncle only had eighth grade educations. One of my grandpa's brothers became an attorney, one became a priest, one sister became a county superintendent of schools for Powell County, one became a nun in Leavenworth, Kansas, and the other one was legal secretary for a law firm in Anaconda. One brother died at a young age.

Brad: So a wide spectrum of professions.

Michelle: Yes. Those folks left the ranch. They had their careers and left ranching, and that's how Grandpa and my great-uncle acquired the ranch. Then one time, probably in 1918, Grandpa went to a dance in Butte, I think it was after the cattle sold, which was really a wild time of partying. Butte is always good for a party, and it was back then, too. Somebody had set him up on a date with this wild-eyed Irish lass in Butte. The problem was that she brought her cousin with her, because that's what reputable young women did back then. Grandpa fell in love with the cousin who became my grandma. They were married in January of 1919. Grandma, Margaret Fogarty, left what was then referred to as the Butte Flats and relative modernization to go to Helmville where there was no running water, no electricity and raised eight kids. My Grandpa died first. As was the case with Irish, this first generation that came here, they were older when they got married. My great-grandpa was 53 when he married my great-grandma, who was 28.

Brad: Why was that?

Michelle: There weren't any women around. When my great-grandma, Marianne McCormick, came over from Ireland, she came over at her brothers' request. Ireland was reeling with poverty, and it was common for family members who came to the United States to then send money to the old country for relatives to come over. She came directly to Helmville because that's where her brothers were. My great-grandpa met the Irish lass who would become his bride. We have always been told they had a wonderful marriage. She was twenty-five years younger than he. She immigrated here in 1883. Great-Grandpa had been here twenty years and had been in Helmville seventeen of those years. She was quite the lady. By this time we had the homestead cabin, and Great-Grandpa had built a log house, a long one-story house. It is still standing and was used as a bunkhouse for decades. Before Great-Grandpa retired and moved to Deer Lodge, he built a huge ranch house. The classic, old two-story ranch house. He and Great-grandma moved to Deer Lodge and carried on their life of entertaining. They were both great for

entertaining. They loved people, they loved music, and they loved their religion. They had to have a big place to bring in all these folks. When they left, there was my grandpa (the oldest) and his brother (who never did marry) and two of grandpa's sisters (who later became the county superintendent and the legal secretary). Four unmarried spirited kids living in this huge house.

Brad: People over all the time?

Michelle: If the walls could talk. My grandma, who again, was born in Chicago, had come out here in a covered wagon. She was raised in Butte. Her dad worked the mines as did all her uncles and cousins. Her maiden name was Fogarty. Word would go back to the old country, to Ireland, and that's how the immigration really happened. People would come here and get letters back to the old country, and people would come here, and they would settle. I have so many relatives in Butte. I just couldn't go to Butte and try to visit everybody.

So Grandma had all that close knit family and the religion. Grandma had graduated from grade school and went right to the Butte Business College. Grandma was trained as a stenographer. She did wicked shorthand. She worked and helped support her mom and dad while she was still living at home. In comparison to the rural, rugged life in Helmville, she had a refined life, with all the shopping she loved.

She left her mom and dad and cousins and sisters and brothers and moved from Butte about 80 miles to Helmville. It was a long, long, trip. There weren't good roads. There weren't dependable cars back then. She left that civilization, and she moved to this huge house where not only her husband lived, but also her brother-in-law and two sisters-in-law (laughter). And then the babies started coming. They were married January 7, 1919, and my dad was born November 1st. There were eight kids, one after another after another. Grandma always had family and hired help, but there was also the huge initial adjustment: living with people she didn't know well, being a new bride, and becoming a first-time mother, all within 10 months while living away from home and the conveniences of city life. Grandma thrived. She quickly and easily slipped into being a rancher's wife. She was a vital and sustaining partner to my grandpa and to the entity known as The Ranch, just as my Great-Grandma had been to my Great-Grandpa and The Ranch.

Brad: Leaving a close knit family like that and going off on your own would be very trying. And while she was having these children, she was also ranching.

Michelle: Yes, because as ranchers there are two things that run your life: Mother Nature and the price of cattle. You can't do anything about either. There was never a sure income in terms of how many cattle and calves would sell in the fall and what would they sell for. If they had a bad calving season, money was tight and emotions were raw. It's still that way. If the weather was bad, certainly they would lose calves and some mothers. If the previous summer was too dry, they dealt with keeping cattle alive through the winter with a hay shortage. It's still that way.

Brad: Very stressful.

Michelle: It would have been very stressful and still is, and my grandma, as with all of us, had a deep and abiding love for animals. It was very hard on Grandma when she knew that animals were dying. It wasn't uncommon at all as a kid to go over to the main ranch house and see

calves on the back porch being bottle fed. She just rolled with the punches. She put her feet down on that ranch and that ranch became Grandma. She seldom complained. I'm certain my Great-Grandma was the same way. Grandma went back to Butte when she could. When she had her babies, she would go to Butte for a month at a time. She would gather up the ones at home, and they would head out early. She'd stay there a while, a baby would be born, and she'd stay a while after, then she'd come home.

Brad: Would her husband go with her? Would she do the entire trip by herself? Was this before she had a baby?

Michelle: She would go to Butte to have the baby. I think Grandpa took her, but then if it were feeding season, haying season, branding, calving, or time to take the cattle to summer pasture, then probably not. If he did take her, he wouldn't stay. He had to be at the ranch. Initially she would have had her two unmarried sisters-in-law. They would have still been at the ranch, and they would cook for Grandpa and his brother and the hired hands. Eventually the two sisters-in-law married and left. But Grandpa saw to it that Grandma usually had help. Often times one of the hired hands had a wife who was hired to help with the cooking, cleaning, and laundry.

But certainly she would come home and still do her share of cooking and cleaning and raising a large family. There was no running to a supermarket. There weren't supermarkets. There was a grocery store in town by then, but she had to load up all those kids, get them into a car, by then I'm sure they had a car, and jostle over the lane to go to the grocery store and get the mail. The post office was in the grocery store. She was tough as nails. All those kids, no running water, no refrigerator, unreliable electricity, no phone, a wood cook stove, a wringer washer…

They had eight kids, first they had seven boys, and the eighth one was a little girl. When she was two, she died of spinal meningitis. Not too long after that one of my uncles was killed in a car wreck. While Grandma was relatively young she buried her only daughter and buried a son and had two sons just back from WWII. She had all of that going on. I never heard Grandma complain. She would maybe complain about the mosquitos. We had mosquitoes, and they kept her out of her yard. They would drive us indoors. That's why we all love wind. In the summer when it was windy before the hay crops came down, that was about the only time we could go outside and stand it. We live in a moist valley, and the mosquitos are horrific. It's flood irrigation, so the water sits. It is perfect for them. You know, she kept her house clean, and she loved to putter. She had wonderful little projects that she did in the house. She would make different curtains. She loved oil cloth and contact paper. She was always making things nice and pretty in this great big house. Then she would go outside and work in her beautiful flowerbeds. She just puttered all day long, from sun up to sun down.

We had a homestead about 18 miles from the main ranch, a part of the acreage Great-Grandpa bought up. She would take her car, no phones of course, and she'd go down there and work alone or with a pack of grandkids. She was quite the carpenter. She fixed up the house on the old homestead. She'd paint and try to get the roof to quit leaking and hang up curtains. I don't think it ever occurred to Grandma that if something had happened to her, she couldn't call for help. She got up with a purpose every day. Being raised around that attitude, we got up every day. There was no lying in bed. Grandma was our inspiration in terms of a meaningful life. Grandpa would always speak about his mother and how strong she was and how she came to that area fresh out of Ireland had eight kids, thrived on the ranch, and entertained the valley

with her grand parties. She made everything: the clothes and the food from scratch. They killed and butchered the cattle, pigs and chickens. Those were the stories that we heard from our grandfather about his parents.

Brad: At this point, when you were spending time with your grandma, where did you live?

Michelle: We lived on the ranch as well. We were right across the meadow.

Brad: So your father was at this time working on the ranch with his dad.

Michelle: Yes, and his brothers. Only one brother left, and he went "all" the way to Butte. One worked for the county, but he worked for Powell County so he worked from home. One was killed. One became a geologist, travelled the world and got tired of the world and missed home. He came home about 1975. It was my dad and the two other brothers who worked the ranch for years.

Brad: That brings us to one of the other questions. When you were younger and you were there with your family, what type of work did you do on the family ranch?

Michelle: I've thought about this question. I really had to stop and think about what was work and what was just life.

Brad: That's a great point. People who I've talked to who grew up on ranches have all said the exact same thing, "It was all work, but it was all fun."

Michelle: Yes, it was all fun.

Brad: Or, it was all work and it was all hard, but there wasn't a differentiation where you go to work for a certain number of hours and then do something else, it was all combined.

Michelle: It was all tied to the seasons, as to what I did. We, and by "we" I mean my cousins and me, just did whatever needed to be done on a given day. The big areas of work, where our whole life became focused on just that, was haying season. It was expected of us to go to the hay fields when we were ten. Prior to that we would help my mom who cooked for the hay crew. The hay crews were big. When I went to the field there were still horses being used for some of the tasks.

Brad: When you were young, you didn't use a swather and tractor?

Michelle: We had tractors, but the horses that were being used were still used for cleanup raking. After the bullrakes bunched the windrows, there would be hay left behind. My grandfather and an old bachelor out there would go behind the bullrakes with the cleanup rakes. My mother lived out there during the war and taught school while my dad was gone. When she hayed in the fields rather than cooking, it was still all horses. In her time the tractors starting coming in. By the time I left the fields for college, the horses were gone. Probably by the mid-1960s we got one of the little bailers and would bail our alfalfa. We really felt we were on the edge of innovation.

We still didn't bail the rest. We still used a beaverslide. We had two of everything; two mowers, two side-delivery rakes, two bullrakes.

Brad: What's a beaverslide?

Michelle: A beaverslide is a tall structure that has a basket on it that has teeth. The bullrakes pull up to a basket and put their basket load on this big tall apparatus. There are cables on the beaverslide's basket. These cables run to a vehicle a short distance from the stack yard.

Brad: So this slide takes a bale of hay?

Michelle: No this was all loose hay. Someone sits in the vehicle which is called the winch. The winch is an old car or truck that has been cut open to expose the inside. The rear end faces the stack. The rear tires have large rims welded on to them for the cable to wrap around. The rear tires are jacked up. When a load of hay is put on the beaverslide's basket, the winch driver puts the winch in reverse and the cables pull the basket up to the top of the beaverslide, and the winch driver tips the basket, the hay slides off, and the driver eases the basket down. This is repeated until a stack is made.

Brad: So it's taking hay from the ground and moving it up to the stack. Is the stack in a truck moving with you?

Michelle: No the stacks are in permanent positions in the field. In the front of the stack you would have the beaverslide. There are two sidestops and a backstop. They are tall, maybe 30ft. You actually have a box you are putting this hay in. You have two guys who are stackers who stand in there. After the hay dumps they move it around to try and give it balance.

Brad: It's good to be able to visualize that.

Michelle: Those were still being used in 1975. In 1975 I came home. My first husband was killed, and I came home, and hayed that summer. I don't think we were baling much then, and I don't know that we were swathing then. There weren't any horses, but it was the same type of equipment. Now, jumping forward, we have swathers and a round bailer. Of course, we don't need the beaverslide anymore. There isn't a hay crew anymore. Four people now do what 12+ used to. When I was being raised haying was huge. We had to have two people for every position in the field. Mom cooked. We had to get to bed early and get up early. It was hard; it was arduous. There weren't cabs on equipment like you see today. We were out in the sun. No air conditioning, no cover, out in the sun. It was hot. The thing is, we didn't know anything different. We really didn't. As we got older and into our teens, we didn't necessarily go to bed early. Some days in the hayfield were long, very long!

Brad: It was work, and it needed to be done.

Michelle: Yes. Haying season was fun. We had great fun in the hayfields laughing and teasing each other. We'd have to hire men from outside the valley, so young guys would start coming out looking for work. The older I and my other girl cousins got, the more appealing haying was.

We just never knew who Grandpa was going to hire. Everyone else was a cousin. Calving was also intense.

Brad: I was just going to ask about that.

Michelle: Calving was intense, and it still is intense. While mechanization changed the whole face of haying, it didn't with calving. It is still the long hours. There are still cows that are going to calve in the middle of the night when it's thirty below. It's rugged hours. After our faith came education. During calving season I wasn't expected to be a night calver. I was to get my rest to go to school. After school is when I would check the cattle. I would check the ones in the meadow by our house.

Brad: Did you go to school in Helmville?

Michelle: I did go to grade school in Helmville, except for two years. My mom was a teacher and back in the day, the 1950s, there were still lots of little schools scattered around the valley near Helmville. There were three years in a row Mom was asked to teach at three of these tiny schools before they had to consolidate with larger area schools, Helmville and Ovando. The first year I didn't go with her. The next two years when I was in third and fourth grade, I went with Mom, and she was my teacher in these one-room schools. Third and fourth grade I went to an even smaller school than I did my other grades in Helmville. I came back to Helmville in fifth grade and graduated and then had to move to Deer Lodge. Helmville has never had a high school, so we had to move to Deer Lodge and room and board with families. I haven't lived at home year round since I was fourteen. You don't get home sick when you go away to college. That's over. So yes, we worked hard calving, haying, fencing, breaking water holes, branding, driving the cattle to and from summer pasture on horseback. All of that.

Brad: I think that goes with another question. What were some of the challenges your family faced while ranching when you were young?

Michelle: Always the weather. You plan to do something, you plan to brand, and the weather would be horrible. Do you go ahead and do it? Or do you wait for it to quit raining? The weather was always a challenge. Our cattle didn't stay at the ranch in the summer. We needed them off the meadows, so they could grow. So the cattle went to summer pasture. Those are the acres Great-Grandpa bought up from the folks who couldn't make it dry-land farming. These pastures are anywhere from 15-18 miles down the old gravel Ovando road. We would drive them on horseback.

Brad: So did you ride?

Michelle: Oh yea. I had a horse that didn't like a horse trailer. If she wouldn't load, there were times when I rode her back home, some 36 miles in a day.

Brad: Real cowboy and cowgirl work.

Michelle: We were raised on horses. Of course now with ATVs, I don't know if the ranch even has any saddle horses. We've got horses that we take in because they need a home, but our hired hand is still a horseman. Most of what is being done on the ranch with cattle is with 4-wheelers. Huge changes that way.

Brad: That brings us into your story, your history. There was an incident when you were twelve-years-old when your parents assumed guardianship over your father's niece. Can you talk a little about how that affected the family; about how adoption was viewed in the community?

Michelle: Sure. When my uncle's wife died giving birth in 1960, dying in childhood was just unheard of. Her death was in a community where it was really only her generation, my uncle's and his wife's generation, where people made it a point to have a doctor at birth. There were still kids being born at home when my dad was being raised. Nobody died. When my aunt Mary Kay died a few hours after giving birth to Nora, it was the defining moment in my family's and my lifetime. I was only two when my uncle was killed, and I wasn't born when my young aunt died of spinal meningitis. In terms of my cousins and me, Mary Kay's death was the first time we felt death. The other folks who died were old, and we made the connection. Old cows die, old horses die, old people die.

Brad: It was somewhat removed from you.

Michelle: Yes. But when she died, it shook the entire community. When I talk about my family, it is pretty hard to keep isolating it from the community. When something hurts a family out there, it hurts the community. When Mary Kay died, it rocked the foundations of that community. No one could believe it happened. My uncle was older when he married, and no one ever thought he'd marry. Then he met this red-haired Irish woman from Butte. Ironically the way he met her was that her dad was the owner of a mortuary that my dad had worked for years prior. There was a connection in Butte. There has always been a Butte connection for Helmville.

They were so happy. Everyone was so happy for them. Then to have this happen, it was a defining moment. That's when my grandpa stepped forward and said the baby would be raised in Helmville. She would not go to Butte and be raised by her maternal grandparents. When Grandpa spoke like that, people listened. The logical people to raise her were Mom and Dad because they only had me. My other married uncle who lived in Helmville had six kids. My Uncle Tommy worked for the county. He lived in Helmville but not at the main ranch house. It would have been really hard for him to raise this infant. She was born in February, back when winters were long and hard, and he would plow at night. Sometimes he would plow 36 hours straight. So she came to our house. Mom and Daddy never adopted her; she wasn't an orphan. Her dad was around all the time. The community was fine with this arrangement because that was the way it was going to be. Grandpa had spoken. If we'd have had to go to court, to have her live in Helmville, her mom's family in Butte wanted to raise her, the entire community would have gone to court and said this is the way it must be. She must be raised by her dad as best he can.

Brad: If she went to Butte he would never see her.

Michelle: He certainly would not have seen her often. Back then, Butte was a long drive, over bad roads, in unreliable cars with tread-worn tires.

Brad: What was here name?

Michelle: Her name is Nora.

Brad: Very interesting. When you were in your teenage years, when you were coming of age, were there ever times when you got the sense that there were strict gender roles between women and men?

Michelle: Not strict. This is tough to answer. There were women who stayed in the house and kept the house. My mom was one of them. There were other women in other families that worked side by side with their husbands and then came in and took care of the house and meals, and the husband didn't do anything in the house. It was also a valley of a lot of bachelors who took care of their house and meals. It wasn't like men were totally helpless in the kitchen. My grandpa washed the dishes. My dad, however, was helpless in the kitchen. He couldn't make popcorn. I never saw him do any housework. It wasn't ever drilled into us girls that in the house is where we should be. The women's lib movement didn't register with me at all. I was thrilled when a man held a door for me, rather than it being a boy cousin slamming it in my face. Those nice lady things, I liked. They were special. I didn't ever relate, and still don't, to the women's lib. It's just nothing that has affected me. Anything I ever wanted to do, I either got to do it, or I wasn't qualified for it. It wasn't that I was stopped from doing it because I was a woman. Out in Helmville now, with all the technology, women are able to work outdoors even more alongside their husbands because when they go in, they have the microwave, the washer, the dryer, frozen meals, throw-away diapers, They have all these modern conveniences. They can go in after working on the ranch all day and get a nice meal on the table. Blurring of gender roles is still big out there. I don't think any of the girls out there in this generation or the half generation between me and now; I don't think any of those girls have ever felt they can't do something because they were girls. We couldn't do some things because we were kids; we just weren't big enough. But it wasn't because we were girls.

Brad: Not because of gender. Very interesting. A positive, I think.

Michelle: Yes. My grandma's grandkids, there were five raised in Butte, so this doesn't apply to them, but her eleven that were raised on the ranch, were semi feral. We ran a lot, always in motion. We would run across the meadows to each other's house. We'd ride the horses hard. We'd run the milk cows in so their milk wasn't any good. We would be dirty. One of my mom's beloved stories of me was when I was little, too young to be in the hay fields, and she was cooking supper for the hay crew over at the main house. She looked out a window, and there I was at the water trough. This was a wood water trough that Great-Grandpa had built. It had green moss growing up from the bottom and scum growing from the top down. I was drinking alongside the horses (laughter). Sucking in the water through closed teeth like horses. Unlike the horses, I would pull the moss and scum off my lips.

When we went to church and when we went to town, Grandma made her granddaughters put on dresses, and she always made sure our fingernails were clean. That was her femininity

that she wanted us to have. We were too young to use make-up, but we dreamed of the time we could, as we watched her "put on her face." The daughters-in-law went along with Grandma's church and town dress code. It was important in this rural environment that we could dress properly, so when we went to town we didn't look like the stereotypical "county bumpkin." When we went to town whether it was Drummond or Avon or Deer Lodge or those rare trips to Butte or Helena or Deer Lodge (we seldom went to Missoula until the highway went through) we had to be in dresses. Our hair had to be combed and our fingernails cleaned. Other than that, just having our hands washed at mealtime and our hair out of our faces was fine.

Brad: It looks like it is 2:20pm. We have about ten more minutes. Maybe I will ask a few questions about your adult years, and we can talk for a few minutes about what is currently going on at the ranch.

Michelle: Ok.

Brad: It says here you worked as a barmaid, and then you decided to go to college. What motivated you to leave the ranch and earn a degree in English?

Michelle: When I was being raised, it wasn't "if you were going to go to college" it was "you are going to go to college." I went directly from high school to college. At the University of Montana I majored in psychology. In Helmville, when I was in grade school, we didn't do any algebra. When I went to Deer Lodge to high school, the freshmen there had had the last half of their 8th grade math as algebra. So all of us coming in from the country schools were behind, and I never got caught up in algebra. This goes back to the fall of 1966. There weren't all these remediation programs and all these "poor you, let us help you" programs. In the psychology program, when we go to doing calculus and stats, I didn't know how to do them. By then I was married. When I went back to school after my son was born, I remembered that I liked this one professor that I had for Introduction to Shakespeare. I took another class from him. He pulled me aside one day and said, "I think you need to major in literature." That was it. That is what I did. I worked as a barmaid in Missoula to help bring in money because my husband and I had our son.

Brad: When were you married?

Michelle: I was married in January of 1967.

Brad: Who was your husband?

Michelle: Cliff Holt. He was from Deer Lodge. We needed money. We were poor married college students living in college housing. The summer I turned twenty-one, I started barmaiding at the Heidelhaus in Missoula. Realizing he wasn't going to be able to support a family as an artist, Cliff switched his major from art to architecture. He also got classified as 4F, meaning he wouldn't be going to Vietnam if he got drafted. His football injury was bad enough that in order for him to be drafted, the Army would have had to be down to taking those who literally just had a pulse. We felt more confident that he would be able to complete college and not go to Vietnam and possibly get killed. He switched to architecture, and we moved to

Bozeman in 1968. I barmaided and bartended there. It was just to bring in the money. It was a good job. I loved it.

Brad: You have here that at some point you got a job at North Idaho College.

Michelle: I did. After my husband was killed in July 1975, I went back to Bozeman. I had my senior year to finish at MSU. I finished that year and graduated and was accepted into grad school in Missoula at University of Montana. So by the fall of 1976, I was in graduate school.

Brad: Did you husband go to Vietnam? Is that how he passed away? If you don't want to answer that is Ok.

Michelle: That's Ok. He graduated in 1973 with a degree in architecture from Montana State, and we moved to Eugene, Oregon, where he worked. In the spring of 1975, he got a job offer with a prestigious architectural firm in Boston. We decided we would move back to Montana for that summer to be with family because not many would make it out to Boston to see us. We were staying down at the homestead that I referred to earlier, that Grandma had fixed up. We were staying down there for the summer. One evening as he was putting up the television antenna and I was sitting in the house relaying the quality of the picture, a gust of wind came up and pulled the antenna. Out there you have to have antennas are tall to get the signal because that area is in a valleya valley. The antenna hit a transformer, and he was electrocuted.

That was July 1975, and that fall is when I went back to school. Like I said earlier, I went to Bozeman to finish my senior year at MSU. By then I had met the man who is my husband now. I finished grad school at UM in1978. He worked for a hardware store, Coast to Coast. The corporate representative saw some potential in him and said there was an opening in Post Falls, Idaho, for assistant manager, so we moved there. I applied for an instructor position at North Idaho College in the ABE/GED program. There were no openings in the English Department. Eventually one came open, but until then I taught Adult Basic Education and GED. I was 17 years at North Idaho College.

Brad: At some point you ended up back in Montana. You came home.

Michelle: I came home. We came to Helena. I was homesick every day. I missed the ranch every day. Being raised out on the ranch, the land gets in your blood. I was homesick. I needed to be able to stand in a meadow that my great- grandfather stood in without it being a seven-hour round trip. When we came back to Montana, we decided on Helena because it's close to the ranch. We knew it would be dry. Coeur d'Alene has a rotten climate. It is cloudy and drizzly a lot. I just wanted to be under the Big Sky sun. And there are jobs here in Helena. Between the two colleges and state jobs, federal jobs, county jobs, city jobs, I figured somebody would need a worker that could work with the English language. We moved here in May of 1999 and have been here ever since. It's good to be home.

Brad: That brings us up to the ranch today. You currently divide your time between teaching English at Carroll College and helping with the ranch. Maybe you can talk about how the family ranch is today, how it's changed, and how has it has stayed the same.

Michelle: The family ranch has changed with technology. The machinery has made a world of difference since I was raised. Other than calving, even there they use the ATVs instead of riding a horse, nothing is the same. I couldn't drive the big tractors now. When I go home to help with haying, I have to be on a tractor pulling a side-delivery rake. I can't drive the big tractors that drive the swather, bale, or carry the bales. I have no idea what to do with those hundred thousand dollar pieces of equipment, other than probably break them.

Brad: Who lives on the ranch now and directs operations?

Michelle: Just this past September the last of my dad's generation died. I had two uncles alive going into this year, 2013, and in June an uncle died and the last one died in September. The third generation, which is my dad's generation, did absolutely nothing in terms of passing the ranch down like my great-grandfather did and my grandfather did. They did nothing. They couldn't agree on what to do. It didn't go well. This is where a lot of family ranches fall apart. You get to a point where you need somebody to look at it with a good clear mind and look at it as a business and push back the family ties and make business decisions that will keep the ranch going. My dad and his siblings did not do that. So now there are 16 of us in the fourth generation. We are slowly inheriting our dad's shares. I haven't inherited my dad's because they went to my mom, and she is still alive. I have two other aunts alive. It really isn't into my generation even though the dads are dead because there are the widows. I don't know what is going to happen to the ranch. All of us say that we want to keep it in the family, and we want to get it to be more prosperous. It is hard ranching when there is no one boss.

I have a first cousin who is a bachelor. He just turned sixty-four. After serving in Viet Nam, working on various ranches, and calling keno at a Helena establishment, he returned to the ranch years ago. He was finally offered the position of manager a few years back. However, he always had to answer to his dad (who is the one who died in June) and the other uncles. It wasn't until this past September when the last uncle died that he didn't have one of the third generation overseeing him. The ranch was incorporated in 1958. Until the death of the last of the third generation, the Board was comprised of the third generation. When my dad died, my mom took his place. Now she remains on the Board, and the other Board members are cousins in my generation, the fourth generation. Because there is no plan of how to keep passing the ranch down in terms of keeping it in the John Geary lineage, it is frightening to think of the very real possibilities.

Brad: So it's in a stage of transition.

Michelle: It is in a stage of transitioning now. I don't know where it's going to go. We all want to keep it in the family, but 11 of us agree for one plan and 5 work against that. Yet, it's awfully hard to go out there and say "whatever." When I stand in the cemetery that holds my great-grandparents and the land was ours until Great-Grandpa donated it, it's gut-wrenching to say I'm so tired of the fighting, and I'm 65, and just let it go. I can sit here in Helena and do that, but when I round one of the bends on the Avon road and the valley sprawls in front of me, probably close to the same vantage point that my great-grandpa had, I just don't know what to do.

Brad: I image so because there is a piece of you in that land as well.

Michelle: It is hard to look at my kids and grandkids. You know my kids are fifth generation; my grandkids are sixth generation. Do I give up the fight and give them no hope of being able to go out there take a walk along the Blackfoot River or Nevada Creek? It's hard, but we're not unique in that sense. The ranches that haven't made it out there, that weren't been passed down to following generations, are now owned by conglomerates.

Brad: Other people who own land there participate in the Blackfoot Challenge, which seems to be trying to gather land from ranchers to put it under a form of conservation.

Michelle: All of our summer pasture is under conservation easement. Not the main ranch. The easement is not with the Blackfoot Challenge. I'm not sure it was up and running when the pastures went into an easement. Ours is with U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife. That was a decision made my by dad and his brothers.

Brad: Do you see that as a positive?

Michelle: No.

Brad: You see that as a negative?

Michelle: We can't do anything with that land. If we could there would be ways to bring in revenue.

Brad: One of the challenges facing the ranch is revenue?

Michelle: Absolutely. It is always revenue. We have to buy hay every winter, every winter thousands of dollars' worth of hay. You can't bring up selling down the cattle without somebody really becoming adamant about that, even though it is common sense. We can't do anything with thousands of acres of sagebrush land, a substantial amount has Blackfoot River frontage, because the uncles jumped on that with the conservation easement. Just selling a couple of those lots to some people from Missoula with restraints on what they could do, we'd have an income, but we can't do anything with this land now, thousands of acres.

So I don't know. It is still all really new because it has just been three months since the demise of the third generation. My generation hasn't had time to try to move forward. Plus there are unknowns. My uncle, who died in September, and his wife did not have any kids. He married late in life, but she has kids from another marriage. This is where it can dwindle away. She will most likely leave the fifth of the ranch she inherited as soon as my uncle died to her kids. Then people we don't know are going to own a fifth of the ranch.

Brad: Bringing in even more variables.

Michelle: And nobody has enough money to buy them out. Again, I'm not trying to begrudge my dad and his brothers or this widow who will probably give it to her kids, it's just the situation that has evolved. The only way it could have been stopped is if my dad and his brothers would

have made plans as to how to pass the ranch on. The third generation tried to get a restrictive shareholders' agreement in place where the shares would have to stay in John Geary's blood lineage; it didn't happen. They fought it, the brothers against each other. Deciding how to pass the ranch to the fourth generation was hard for them to do because, in the end, they were facing their own mortality. So, I don't know where we are going. It will probably stay in the family for a while. I have another cousin who was raised out there who is ready to come home when he finishes his time in the Marines. He's ready to come home and take over the management that my present cousin is doing. But that doesn't mean the ranch will go on. We still have to have the money and that is just so hard. As always, we are at the mercy of Mother Nature and cattle prices. And, now, others who may want to sell their shares.

Brad: I think that this has been a fantastic interview.

Michelle: Thank you.

Brad: We've covered everything here. I always like to close with one question. What did you love most about ranching? We can end there.

Michelle: The closeness to the land.

Brad: You didn't even have to think for a second.

Michelle: No, the closeness to the land. To go down in those pastures, those sagebrush pastures and go on old cattle trails, that my great-grandfather's cattle carved, what a tremendous senses of connection to all that really matters. I go down there with my grandkids and walk on those old cattle trails, made by those cows that Great-Grandpa would get down to summer pasture, and they would wander through the sagebrush down to the river's edge, and wander around another way to get back up out of the river bottom. Cows will follow a trail. The cows we turn out every spring will walk on those same trails from the late 1800s early 1900s. I just can't go on those trails and not be changed by them.

Beyond the land, those meadows up at the main ranch, hay growing over the plot of land down in the lower meadow where the homestead cabin stood, where my Great-Grandpa used to use tallow to make candles so there would be light. To touch the cabin and to look at the other house that sits on this hallowed land. My grandpa and all eight of his siblings were born in that building. It's the land. It's the smells. Grandpa taught us to read the sky for the weather. He taught us about the animals. Everything: all tied to the land. Mine was a magical childhood. It was a magical upbringing. It was idyllic. We worked hard, but it was idyllic. There were plenty of bad times, rough times. But my cousins and I had each other, and we had a really good life.

Brad: I think that's a great place to end, and I'd like to thank you again.

Michelle: You are welcome.